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Civil-Military Command Relationships in the USSR

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CIVIL-MILITARY COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE USSR

The long-unsettled issue of the proper institutional relationship between the national civil and military authorities in the Soviet Union may again be under active consideration. Since the fall of Khrushchev in 1964, no formal body above the Defense Ministry is known to have exercised a leadership function in this area. Earlier, however, a variety of approaches to the problem had been tried at one time or another. The essential issue involves the degree of Communist Party control over command decision-making, and the military have always had good reason to be wary of the politicians, particularly since Khrushchev. Of late, however, the military seem to have become apprehensive that the absence of formal machinery at the apex of the command structure might be a serious handicap in time of war.

Background

The constitutional framework for high-level political/military relations in the USSR is sketchy. According to the present constitution, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (the legislative body) appoints the military high command, and the Council of Ministers (the government) coordinates and directs the work of the Ministry of Defense. Both the

Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministers recognize the leading role of the party, as do all organizations and administrations in the USSR.

However, there is no formal designation of a supreme commander in chief and no formal framework for high-level civil-military relations. At present, only informal arrangements exist,

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based upon the power of individuals and institutions participating in policy-making in the USSR. If the new Soviet constitution targeted for adoption to "crown the glorious 50 years of the country of Soviets" is to redress these shortcomings, discussion of high-level command and control arrangements would be in order at this time.

In the past, Soviet leaders have employed at least three varieties of high-level political/military organ. The Labor and Defense Council chaired by Lenin functioned as an "inter politburo" during the Civil War, as did the State Defense Committee headed by Stalin during World War II. Although formally subordinated to the Council of Ministers, these groups exercised absolute authority not only over the military command, the state apparatus, the economic administration, and the party, but also over the central committee and its politburo.

A second type of body--the Main Military Council (1938-41 and 1946-50?) and its apparent successor, the Supreme Military Council (1950-57? and 1958-63?)--has functioned from time to time as a transmission organ between the central committee and the Ministry of Defense. Bringing together the nation's most important political and military leaders, these councils not only served as discussion forums to advise the political leaders on military matters, but also issued directives to the Ministry of Defense and the other organiza-

tions responsible for executing policies in the military sphere.

A third type of body, referred to as the Military Council (1934-38) and as the Higher (or Supreme) Military Council (1963?-present), has functioned as a collegium within the Ministry of Defense, paralleling the structure of military councils existing at lower levels in the armed forces. Including in its membership the defense minister, other leading military figures, and some high-level party and government figures, this body has advised the minister of defense in his supervision of the armed forces and shares with him the responsibility for all major decisions made within the Ministry of Defense.

The Khrushchev Period

After World War II, high-level political/military relationships in the USSR fluctuated, and the history of formal command machinery during the period 1946-57 is, at best, unclear. One of the charges belatedly levied against Marshal Zhukov after he had been ousted from the politburo and as defense minister in 1957 was that he had insisted upon the liquidation of the Supreme Military Council in order to weaken the party's control over the armed forces. Shortly after Zhukov's ouster, Khrushchev revitalized the military councils and the Supreme Military Council. The latter body gave the professional military leaders, who were no longer

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represented in the politburo, direct access to Khrushchev and his "inner politburo" at an early stage in the policy-making process, but the role of the military is believed to have been largely consultative and their advice was in no way binding. At the same time, the council's composition and modus operandi enabled Khrushchev to operate through his "inner politburo" and thus bypass the politburo itself on certain military/political matters.

There is ample evidence that not only the "outs" among the politburo members but also the military establishment in general became dissatisfied because Khrushchev used the council and his "inner politburo" to ram through his innovations in military matters during the late 1950s and early 1960s. There is reason to believe that some sort of compromise curbing Khrushchev's council was worked out in the spring of 1963 in the aftermath of the Cuban missile debacle. The Dictionary of Russian Language Abbreviations published in Moscow in 1963 refers to the council in such a way as to suggest that it had been abolished or modified by approximately that time.

In any case, the USSR's military leaders since then have enjoyed greater autonomy than formerly in determining how to safeguard the nation against external enemies and have thus gained a correspondingly greater influence in national policy-making. However, this "unfettering" of the high command has not

constituted a "victory" of the army over the party. Instead, it appears that the political authorities have become more receptive than before to the military's argument that military theory and strategy should be primarily determined by professional considerations.

The Present Arrangement

In October 1965, Brezhnev stated privately that he was the chairman of a "Defense Council," the nature of which he did not specify. Although such a council may exist as the lineal descendant of the Khrushchev council, this has been the only known reference to such a body during the post-Khrushchev period. On the other hand, spokesmen for the armed forces have denied that any body such as the 1958-63 Supreme Military Council now exists "outside the Ministry of Defense." They have insisted that the only high-level political/military organ now functioning in the USSR is the Higher Military Council--also sometimes referred to as the Supreme Military Council--which they say is merely the apex of the system of military councils in the various service branches and at the military district level, not a supra - Defense Ministry body. The scanty evidence available thus suggests that the present arrangement in the Soviet Union for civil-military relations at a level above the Ministry of Defense is an informal one.

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In theory, the post of supreme commander has remained vacant since Stalin gave up that title early in 1946. Marshal Sokolovsky's classic treatise, Military Strategy, published in 1962 and 1963, implied that in the event of a future war, an organ similar in function to Stalin's old State Defense Committee would be formed. According to Sokolovsky, this body would be headed by the CPSU's first secretary and the chairman of the Council of Ministers, "to whom the functions of the supreme commander in chief would also be entrusted."

When Sokolovsky's book was published, Khrushchev was both party first secretary and chairman of the Council of Ministers, and during the XXII CPSU Congress in October 1961 Defense Minister Malinovsky had referred to him as the armed forces' supreme commander. During the celebration of Khrushchev's 70th birthday in April 1964, Malinovsky and several other military leaders again referred to Khrushchev as the armed forces' supreme commander.

Since Khrushchev's removal, however, the top party and government posts have been separated, and Soviet officials from time to time have indicated that the post of supreme commander remains vacant. Defense Minister Malinovsky is said to be commander in chief of the armed forces, but only in wartime would party Secretary General Brezhnev, the political leadership's most authoritative spokesman on military affairs, become supreme commander.

Against this background, a recent discussion of the question of top-level political/military relationships in the Soviet military newspaper, Red Star, acquires unusual significance. As a rare public airing of this particular phase of the frequently discussed general problem of command and control arrangements, the article may be an indicator of the direction of coming change. Written by Major General V. Zemskov, who in the past has commented on various questions of military doctrine, the article in effect argues the case for the peacetime creation of a high-level "War Council" in the Soviet Union.

Zemskov spells out the conventional Soviet line on the supremacy of the policy-making political leadership over the policy-implementing military establishment. He polemicizes against those "in the foreign press" who argue that under the conditions of modern war the importance of political leadership is greatly reduced. On the contrary, according to Zemskov, the political leaders' responsibilities--which include mobilizing the nation, conducting its foreign policy, and exercising ultimate control over its nuclear arsenal--would become substantially more important in time of war. He adds that the political leadership must also involve itself "more actively and to a greater extent" in the solution of even those purely military problems that will arise during a war. Zemskov concludes

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that the two world wars "demonstrated" that wartime leadership "cannot be left in the hands of the military command alone," and that under modern conditions there would not be time to reorganize when war comes.

According to Zemskov, the military/political organs necessary for national leadership during an all-out war "are already being created" in other countries. As examples, he lists the US National Security Council and the defense committees in France and the German Federal Republic. However, he makes no reference to any contemporary Soviet equivalent, which is significant because of his praise for earlier Soviet "war councils"--both the Labor and Defense Council and the State Defense Committee--as well as his approving reference to the present-day Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact as an example for the wartime leadership of an alliance. Thus, the impression left by the article is that the Soviet Union at present lacks adequate institutional arrangements in this field.

Furthermore, the tone of the article is such as to reflect doubt about the ability of the present collective leadership to deal effectively with a military crisis. Zemskov's analysis of the relative merits of collective leadership as compared with those of command by one man is very carefully balanced as befits this politically delicate topic, but by implication and in effect it favors the latter. The examples of civil-military organizations

he cites with favor--both the Soviet precedents and the contemporary Western models--place ultimate responsibility for national policy in one man: the nation's most important political figure. Zemskov is more restrained in tone than was Marshal Sikolovskiy, who endorsed the combining of the posts of party leader, premier, chairman of the State Defense Committee, chairman of the Supreme High Command, minister of defense, and supreme commander in chief during World War II as "the highest degree of unity in leadership." Nevertheless, Zemskov implies that the assignment of ultimate responsibility for military affairs to individual political leaders and to an individual political leader must be formalized now.

Outlook

The appearance of the Zemskov article suggests that the Soviet military establishment has become dissatisfied with the existing, apparently informal arrangements for national leadership in wartime. Such a development was suggested by remarks last October attributed to Marshal P. A. Rotmistrov, Malinovsky's assistant for military educational institutions, which implied that Brezhnev might be named supreme commander before any question of the outbreak of war arose. This hint, together with recent arguments that command and control arrangements must be completed in peacetime, as well as Zemskov's treatment of the existing arrangements, all suggest a move to have Brezhnev named supreme

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commander now. Such a development would enhance his standing among his politburo colleagues as well as his position vis-a-vis the military establishment.

There are several reasons why the military establishment might wish to press these proposals at the present time. For one, despite the residue of suspicion that probably persists among most Soviet military leaders, many of them may have concluded that the present political leaders, operating under the constraints of collectivity, would be unlikely to attempt to take advantage of such "reforms" to emulate Khrushchev in interfering in strictly military matters. Moreover, the military may view Brezhnev as sympathetic to their needs, and therefore would wish to strengthen his hand against those of his colleagues who are less enthusiastic than he about defense spending. Finally, from a strictly military viewpoint, the international situation--both the Vietnamese war and deteriorating relations with China--may

have increased the military establishment's apprehension about its ability to meet a military crisis with its existing command and control arrangements.

In addition, it is also possible that the Soviet political authorities, who face the prospect of a broad changing of the guard at the apex of the military establishment, view reorganization with favor. Marshal Malinovsky's recent illness is only one of the indications that the overaged high command is wearing out. This personnel change, when it occurs, will probably not be confined merely to the shifting of a few generals, but will more likely bring a sudden influx of a new generation of personalities into the high command. Thus, the formalization of the relationship between the nation's political and military leaders may be desired to avoid "misunderstandings" after the old guard departs.

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